

## **Schools Make a Difference**

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On May 10, 1823, the Bacon family had a wonderful experience when their son Samuel was born near Cortland, Ohio. When Samuel was a young boy, he often laughed or smiled. However, during his childhood years Samuel became very sick with scarlet fever. As a result, he lost his sight completely. After being diagnosed, his family did not know what life would have in store for him. Little did he or his parents know that some day he would become an instrument for the blind in Jacksonville, Illinois.

In 1838, Samuel's parents decided to place him in the institution for the blind in Franklin, Ohio. Because of his brilliance, he was continually left with nothing to do. Teachers were told not to give Samuel any help, since they thought that his brilliance might be discouraging the other students. Being bored, Samuel Bacon started his own business, manufacturing and selling cleaning brushes. However, in 1841, all this changed when he was introduced to the study of algebra, geometry, and physics, something he had not known before.

In 1844, at the age of 21, he headed to Gambier, Ohio, to attend Kenyon College. After attending Kenyon for over a year, he returned to Franklin, Ohio to teach at his old school. However, after teaching for two years, he decided he wanted to live closer to his family. In 1847, he traveled to Cincinnati where he took a steamboat to Galena, Illinois. On his trip, he struck up a conversation with a stranger. They began talking about the Illinois Constitutional Convention being held in Springfield, Illinois. Immediately,

Samuel Bacon took great interest when he heard the meeting might involve establishing a new institution for the blind.

Bacon decided to travel to Jacksonville instead of Galena since his plan was to establish a blind institution there. While in Jacksonville, he stayed at the Morgan House, an old building that once housed the insane. During his first days in the town, he found out what an exciting community Jacksonville was. Samuel learned it was the center of a fertile agriculture area and was also the first town to have a railroad in the state of Illinois. Since the people of Jacksonville took great pride in the institutions already built for the insane, deaf, and dumb, they thought it right to build one for the blind. While in Jacksonville, Samuel met Dr. English who invited him to a meeting being held on December 10, 1847 to discuss the institution. At this time, no one could possibly know that this meeting would lead to a school that would teach only blind students.

During the meeting, Samuel pointed out that there were only three institutions for the blind in the United States, and most of them were located in the Northeast territory. As the meeting progressed, they reviewed how some of the other blind institutions had been established. It was discovered that many of the other blind institutions were established by private funds. Once the legislatures saw that the blind would be able to lead productive lives, they were more willing to provide money needed. As Samuel Bacon kept his interest in the blind institution, many people encouraged him to make a final decision, and establish the school for the blind.

Later, Samuel Bacon visited some of the surrounding towns to find parents interested in sending their children to his school. He found four parents who would be

willing to give their children a challenge and send them to school. Since the three other blind institutions had been a success the legislature decided to give this one a chance.

On June 5, 1848 the blind institution in Jacksonville, Illinois was opened in an old building. The school started with only four students, George Springer, John Jones, and George and Nancy Fielding. In the next two months, many students worked hard learning songs, reading parts of the Bible, and doing mental math problems. Once they learned this, they were to present it in front of the legislature insuring that the institution would continue to remain open.

On January 3 and 4, 1849, Samuel Bacon took his four students to Springfield, Illinois, to demonstrate the progress they had made. Many other blind students and disabled children also made their presentations. Different children with different disabilities showed what they had learned over the past years and months. The legislature was very impressed with the abilities of these students.

With the approval of the legislatures and the assurance of three thousands dollars, the people of Jacksonville began rehabilitating the existing blind institution. Although it was to be finished on April 1, 1849, many delays occurred, and it did not reopened nine months later.

After reopening, there were no problems with attendance. After seeing the success of students, and what productive lives they were leading, parents began flooding the school. Within four more months, students were being turned away.

Today, you can travel to Jacksonville, Illinois and see the institution still educating blind students. Every year the enrolment increases. This blind institution in Jacksonville, Illinois is only one of the many ways we can help disabled young people. [From Don

Harrison Doyle, The Social Order of a Frontier Community; "Samuel Bacon  
(Jacksonville, Illinois), Timeline,"

<http://www.morgan.k12.il.us/isvi/historic%20line%%time%20of%201SVI.html>. ]